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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 000141

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SUBJECT: PM HARPER SEEKS AFGHAN EXTENSION, WITH CAVEATS

REF: A. OTTAWA 107

[1](#)B. OTTAWA 124

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: PM Harper publicly voiced his agreement with the Manley panel's call for an extension of Canada's mission in Kandahar after February 2009 - as long as NATO provides additional troops and equipment to help out (ref a). He pledged personally to take the lead to press Canada's allies abroad and promised a Parliamentary vote "this spring," likely after the Bucharest Summit. Liberal leader Dion separately called for greater transparency, but essentially agreed that Canadian Forces should continue to play a role in Afghanistan even after February 2009. While PM Harper has once again underscored the government's resolve to maintain an active presence in Kandahar and Afghanistan well beyond February 2009, he adroitly put the onus on NATO partners to help out more in order to enable him to return from the Bucharest Summit with sufficient commitments to lessen the vulnerabilities of Canadian Forces and win the controversial Parliamentary vote on Afghanistan. End summary.

"A CLEARLY COMPELLING CASE"

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a rare press conference on January 28, Prime Minister Stephen Harper praised the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan (aka the Manley panel) for having produced an "in-depth" and "balanced" report, which PM Harper said had made a "clearly compelling" case for the continuation of the mission -- if NATO partners are willing to provide "substantially" more troops and additional military equipment in Kandahar. He underlined the importance of the continuation of the mission to the security of Canada and the world as well as to Canada's international reputation, and cited Canada's obligation to the people of Afghanistan and the sacrifices of Canadian troops. He said that Canada had already begun in the past two years to shift emphasis to rebuilding, reconstruction, good governance, and democracy in Afghanistan, as well as strengthening combat forces on the ground, as the panel had called for. He admitted that the Afghan issue had brought him "more headaches and heartaches" than any other issue since he assumed office in 2006, and that the situation on the ground remained "complex and difficult."

[1](#)3. (SBU) PM Harper explicitly endorsed the recommendation of the panel that there could be no fixed deadline to Canada's commitment in Afghanistan, while he commented that the mission would warrant regular reviews, perhaps in two to three years' time.

A DIPLOMATIC "FULL-COURT PRESS"

[1](#)4. (SBU) PM Harper nonetheless made clear that an extension of Canada's mission was contingent on additional support from NATO partners. He said that the Manley panel's report had provided Canada with "tremendous ammunition" to press NATO allies to provide

more resources for the Kandahar deployment, but said he was "optimistic" that NATO would deliver. He promised personally to lead a "full court press" in advance of the April 2-4 NATO summit in Bucharest. He emphasized that NATO's efforts in Afghanistan and especially in Kandahar were not adequate, and warned that NATO's reputation is "on the line," adding that, if NATO cannot succeed in Kandahar, "it will ultimately not do it anywhere."

15. (SBU) PM Harper claimed that the Canadian government had already ordered new helicopters and UAVs for Canadian Forces, but still faced time lags for delivery given worldwide demand. He promised to face time lags for delivery given worldwide demand. He promised to work to move Canada's needs higher up on the priority delivery lists as well as to seek additional equipment from NATO partners.

A PARLIAMENTARY VOTE IN THE SPRING

16. (SBU) PM Harper said that he had begun to prepare the ground for a parliamentary vote to extend the mission by reaching out to Liberal leader Stephane Dion on January 27, and that he hoped to do so again in a few days. Harper added that the Cabinet had already reached a "tentative conclusion" on how to proceed, and would share that with Dion to avoid "springing" anything on him. He said that he had not spoken with any other Liberals, notably deputy Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff (who had supported the extension of the combat mission in 2006), in order to avoid any impression of undermining Dion. He pledged that all parties would have a "few weeks" to study and debate the report before the vote. He admitted that some parties might use the issue to play election politics, but pointedly appealed to the Liberals to rise above partisanship. He predicted a vote some time "this spring," but promised that the Parliamentary debate would begin before the Bucharest Summit.

DION RESPONDS

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17. (SBU) Dion subsequently complained to reporters that the Prime Minister had been "vague" and seemed to have provided only "a recipe for a never-ending mission." He called upon the government to clarify next steps on diplomacy, treatment of detainees (a hot topic in the first Question Hour of the new Parliamentary session on January 28), and NATO's plans for rotation of troops, which Dion labeled a "test for NATO." He stated that the Liberal Party believes that Canadian Forces should indeed remain in Afghanistan after February 2009, but said that it was now up to the government to design "something that makes sense" in lieu of the current combat mission. He called for greater transparency from the government, a theme also of the Manley panel recommendations. He said that the ultimate Liberal position will depend on what, exactly, the Prime Minister formally proposes, but predicted that the House of Commons would need to debate and discuss the policy "at great length," pointedly citing the six hour limit the government had set before the 2006 vote on the mission's extension.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) While PM Harper has once again underscored the government's resolve to maintain an active presence in Kandahar and Afghanistan well beyond February 2009, he adroitly put the onus on NATO partners to help out more in order to enable him to return from the Bucharest Summit with sufficient commitments to lessen the vulnerability of Canadian Forces and win the controversial Parliamentary vote on Afghanistan. With the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democratic Party already ruling out any support for the mission's extension in any form, the government will need to craft an approach that will make the extension palatable enough to the Liberals so that they can at least abstain in good conscience, or even possibly vote in favor. It is unlikely that the Liberals will want to use this particular vote to bring down the government, probably judging that the electorate would rather focus an election on economic or environmental issues than on one with national security implications. PM Harper may have boxed himself into a bit of corner, however, by stating the government had already placed orders for key new military equipment when that procurement process is far from complete; he will likely face some tough questioning on

these acquisitions in upcoming Parliamentary Question Hours.
WILKINS